Are your Sows in Condition?
Eileen A. Coite, Wayne County

With winter in full swing, one of the most critical goals of any livestock producer is making sure his or her animals are in suitable body condition to brave the cold temperatures. Luckily for our sows, most of them (unless you are an outdoor producer) are tucked away in a nice climate controlled building, equipped with gas heaters. In fact, we’re usually more concerned about sow comfort in the summer months, making sure no one is overheated. Either way, it’s important to make sure these ladies are comfortable and healthy year-around so they can do their job well.

One of the critical management factors we need to continually evaluate in the sow herd is body condition. Maintaining the ideal body condition score is key to keeping sows fertile, pregnant, or lactating, depending on where they are in the production stage. Of course, it’s a big circle anyway and getting out of condition in any stage will have an impact down the road. Not to mention it will impact the feed bill when sows aren’t in consistent body condition. Having to “bump up” too many feeders can have a tremendous impact on these costs in addition to the delay in her production efficiency, whether it be from delaying her breeding cycle, slowing down her milking ability, or weaning her litter.

So what is ideal? It depends on the production stage she is currently at. If we start with farrowing, the ideal condition would be a 3 to 3.5.
Scoring this at farrowing will give her the best potential to stay at or above a score of 2.5 at weaning, which will put her in ideal condition for breeding. A good goal would be to have 80% of farrowed sows scoring at least a 3 at farrowing. Remember, getting sows too fat before farrowing is no good either. Overweight sows can have dystocia (difficult farrowing) problems as well as lactation issues once the pigs arrive. Often overweight sows will have milking difficulties as much as an underweight sow. The chart seen below is widely used across the swine industry for body condition monitoring. Points to evaluate on the sow are the ribs, the backbone, the "H" bones (hip or hook bones) and the pin bones. It is often useful to actually feel the sow instead of just visually evaluating her, and remember that different animals will show condition in different areas, just as we do. Using the Body Condition Score (BCS) chart seen below will help illustrate this.

Figure 2. Body condition scores of sows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Detection of ribs, backbone, &quot;H&quot; bones, and &quot;pin&quot; bones</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Emaciated</td>
<td>Obvious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Thin</td>
<td>Easily detected with pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ideal</td>
<td>Barely felt with firm pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Overly fat</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The best time to score sows would be at critical times in her gestation, or at times when she is being monitored for something else as well. For example, at breeding is a good time to score her, and again approximately 30 days later at pregnancy checking. Other good times would be at day 80 when we look for visible outward signs of pregnancy. Checking about every 3-4 weeks, usually at these critical stages is a good rule of thumb, since a visible change in her condition is hard to detect on a more frequent basis.

After assessing the sow, adjusting the feed (if needed) is the next most obvious, critical management strategy. So how much should we adjust? First, it's important to have what's called a "base feeding rate" during gestation. Usually, this would be somewhere in the 4.5-5 pound range of a corn/soybean meal based diet. If you are a contract grower, your company service person or training staff will be the best resource for recommending the base-feeding rate for your sows. After the base feeding rate has been established, then you can add or take away to meet condition. If the sow were a score of 2, she would need an additional pound added to her ration. For a score of 1 she would need at least 2 pounds more. On the other end of the scale, a score of 4 would merit a reduction of ½ pound, while a score of 5 needs a pound taken away. BCS scoring and adjusting feed is very subjective, and it is critical to make sure the SAME person (or persons) does this job each time! Never send a different person out to condition score and adjust feeders, and each of us may score slightly different. Consistency is the key here.

As always, consult your veterinarian or nutritionist as to the best management system for your herd. If you are a grower with a particular company, you will most likely have guidelines for BCS scoring that the integrator expects you to follow, which take into account the genetics of your sows. The article should serve as a guideline but in no way replace recommendations of your service or training personnel, nutritionist or veterinarian.

Being a Livestock Agent I have heard this question several times, “I’ve got 10 acres of pasture, how many cows can I have?” and I have also heard “I’ve got 3 horses and 1.5 acres of pasture, why can’t I grow any grass?” Do you know the answers to these questions? Both of these questions have to deal with carrying capacity. The answers to these questions could be very simple or complicated; it just depends on a combination of different factors. Carrying capacity is defined as the stocking rate that achieves a targeted level of animal or economic performance over a defined period of time without causing deterioration of the pasture ecosystem. Stocking rate is defined as the number of animals stocked per acre of grazing land in a management unit for a defined period of time and is correlated with carrying capacity. Carrying capacity depends on several factors including soil productivity, rainfall, and management ability of the landowner. If a producer has pasture land that is very sandy then in general it is safe to say the land is not the most productive soil type available for growing all types of grasses. Sandy soil does not have the capability of holding moisture because of the lack of clay in the soil and the size of the particles of the sand. This is a factor that is out of the producer’s hand, but is a deciding factor when determining pasture grasses to plant and management schemes for your operation. For example a sandy soil would be able to grow a warm season grass like bermudagrass or bahiagrass with proper management and would not be able to grow fescue. Therefore as a manager you could have summer grasses for grazing and would have to feed hay in the winter and/or overseed with ryegrass or a small grain for supplemental grazing. These things should be taken into consideration when deciding stocking rates. How do you know if you are overstocked? One way to tell is if the planted grass in your pastures is not present during the times it is supposed to be actively growing, then there is a good chance you may be overstocked if all other factors are not the problem.

Stocking rate is the number of animals on an acre of grazing land in management for a certain period of time. If Producer A and Producer B both have the same number of acres of bermudagrass pastures, with the same number of cows, on the same type of soil and Producer A is able to run more cows per acre than the other with a healthy stand of bermudagrass year after year, what other factors do could be in his favor than Producer B? The planning process of establishing pastures in the beginning has a huge impact on carrying capacity. Producer A could be taking soil samples yearly and applying the proper amount of nutrients and lime needed to help his bermudagrass grow more efficiently. He may have also anticipated having brood cows when establishing pastures whereas Producer B anticipated having goats when establishing his pastures. Producer A could also have his pastures broken up into different fields for the use of rotational grazing with his brood cows and Producer B just allows the cows to graze the same pasture without rotation for the entire season. Properly fertilized/limed, what animals will be on the pasture, what stage of production they are in, and how you manage them on the pastures are all important factors that affect the capability of the pastured land to hold a certain number of animals. For help with determining your carrying capacity and stocking rate for your situation please contact your county Livestock Agent for assistance because there is so many different factors that determine your carrying capacity.
Cattlemen are always trying to figure out how to increase profits from the herd. There are lots of changes that can be made, but only a few will actually yield a good result. There is a tool that some producers have not used yet that can significantly increase income and save labor. The length of the calving season can be managed to produce more pounds of calf at weaning and therefore increase profit.

Weaning of calves is typically done at a given date regardless of weight or age of the calves. Young calves wean at lighter weight than older calves simply due to age. For example, a calving season of 180 days results in calves that may have weaning weights anywhere from 320 pounds to 560 pounds and ages of 4 months to 8 months of age. Let’s assume that the average weight for this set of calves is 480 pounds. Total weaning weight for 100 herd of calves is 48,000 pounds. Now, let’s assume that this same set of cows calve in 60 days rather than 180 days. Weight for these calves range from 500-560 pounds and let’s say the average is 542 pounds. Total weaning weight for the 100 herd of calves is 54,200 pounds. The difference in weight is 6,200 pounds or equivalent to selling 11 more calves OR an extra 62 pounds per calf if breeding season is shortened. Another way to look at this, in the shortened breeding season, the producer could experience 7% reduction in weaning weights or calf crop to have the equivalent income as the lengthened calving period. Assume calves are selling around $100 per cwt, this translates into an increase of $62 per calf. The results of a similar scenario in regards to potential income will vary slightly dependent upon price of calves. Lighter calves do bring more money per pound however, it has been estimated that a uniform calf crop that is similar in appearance can optimistically yield a premium of $50-$70 per head, further supporting economic benefit to shorter calving seasons.

Shortening the calving season has other benefits as well. Calving season of 60 days means fewer nights watching cows and fewer days tagging calves. Calf loss due to negligence or lack or recognition of dystocia problems is less likely to occur. My experience is that the last few cows to calve have a tendency to not be watched as closely because focus is on other projects such as seeding crops or fertilizing pastures. By shortening the calving season we are less likely to be distracted. Having a calving season of 45-60 days will result in a more productively sound herd. The females that do not breed back within this structure will eventually fall out of the herd leaving only the most productively sound females and will propagate productively sound replacement heifers.

How do we accomplish a tighter calving season? The strategy will depend upon how spread out your current calving season is and the number of cows in your herd. If you are currently calving year-round, it may take a few years to achieve a 60 day calving season without too much loss of revenue. However, the first line of attack should always be with your replacement heifers. A producer should pick his target dates for calving and plan appropriately for the replacement heifers. Be sure to breed the heifers 3-4 weeks prior to the mature cows in order to allow the growing heifer ample time to recover from calving/lactation before the next breeding season.

Remember that tight breeding season means tight calving season. Although you have less time to watch cows, intensity of calving can be great particularly if synchronization was utilized. Management of a short breeding/calving season will be successful only if the producer is firm with the dates. Bulls must be turned in with the cows on the appropriate date and must be pulled at the appropriate date regardless of other obligations. Cows that do not breed and calve within the set season must be culled without exception.

Shortening the calving season is a cost effective program that can increase profit and reproductive performance of the herd with little to no extra input costs.
Are Ewe Kidding?
Margaret A. Bell, Craven & Jones Counties

When your does and ewes go into labor, you want to make sure you are prepared to help them kid or lamb, if the need arises. As a livestock owner, you should familiarize yourself with symptoms of dystocia (difficulty during parturition) and know what to do in the event of an emergency.

Typically, most does and ewes are going to successfully complete parturition (birthing) without human assistance. The doe or ewe is likely going to wait until she is by herself or the surrounding areas are quiet before she begins to kid or lamb. Sometimes it is just best to step aside and let mother nature take over. However, sometimes, it is best to aid a doe or ewe in distress.

When in doubt, a good rule to use is the 30-30-30 rule. Allow 30 minutes for delivery to be completed after a doe or ewe goes into labor. As an exception to this rule, do not wait 30 minutes for the kid or lamb to be born if it is yellow with meconium. This is an indication it is already not receiving enough oxygen and should be delivered immediately. If things appear to be normal and the mother has not had any problems so far, you may allow an additional 30 minutes before you step in. Lastly, if the doe or ewe has already had one or more fetuses without human assistance but you believe there to be another fetus, you may allow another 30 minutes to pass before you help deliver that fetus.

After becoming comfortable with the above rule, there are several other helpful tips you should consider before you assist a doe or ewe during parturition. You want to keep the area as sterile as possible. This includes wearing sterile gloves and washing the vulva of the doe or ewe using a mild dish detergent or betadine. Also, you need to use lubricant when you examine the doe or ewe.

You may want to invest in a “lamb puller,” also known as a head snare. This tool can be very helpful in trying to correct a lamb or kid with its head back. Most kids or lambs can be delivered head first, known as anterior position or hind feet first, known as posterior position. Immediately after pulling a lamb or kid, you should clear its nose, and place it with the mother. Make sure to check for more fetuses. You will want to follow up with antibiotics if they are necessary. Always consult your veterinarian about vaccination protocol and dosage directions.

After the kid or lamb is born, proper care must be given to ensure a healthy start for the animal. Once the animal is born, you should shorten the umbilical cord, if needed, and dip it into a 7% tincture of iodine. Strip the plugs out of the dam’s teats to ensure the kid or lamb does not have to suck hard to get its first drink. Watch closely to make sure the kid or lamb is actually sucking, but leave the dam and young alone. Lambs and kids need time to find the udder and begin to recognize their mother.

Also, make sure the kid or lamb is as dry as possible, especially if temperatures are low. You may need to use a knitted sweater, sock, or sweatshirt as a coat for the young, if temperatures are especially low. This may help to save the life of the kid or lamb. Overall, monitor your dams that are in labor. If you have any questions, you should consult your veterinarian.

Calendar of Events

- January 11th - Wayne County Cattlemen’s Annual Meeting
  Wayne Center 6:30 pm
- January 14th - Wayne County Jr. Livestock Show & Sale
  Registration deadline
- February 11th - Deadline to start animal project for Jr. Livestock Show and Sale

If you have any questions, please call Kim Davis at (919) 731-1520
Forage Management Tips

January

- If winter pasture is limited, feed hay in the pasture or allow cows to graze every other day. The priority for limiting pasture is (1) calves by creep grazing, (2) stockers, (3) nursing cows, and (4) dry cows.
- Keep animals off newly planted winter annuals during wet periods to prevent damage. Allow calves first priority to graze.
- Sample hay bales which are stored outside that will be fed during the next four to eight weeks.
- Decide which fields will be re-seeded or overseeded during late winter and early spring; obtain soil test and supplies for planting.
- Lime may be applied during this off season.
- Keep a record of winter weed problems so that control measures can be taken next fall. This is the latest month that some herbicides may be used on legumes.
- Determine animal feed requirements for the year (about 6 tons of hay equivalent/cow-calf pair) and outline a 12 month forage production and use plan to meet the needs.

February

- Apply nitrogen to cool-season grasses to stimulate early spring growth.
- Overseed legumes, such as ladino clover, into well-grazed (2 inches or less) grass pastures.
- Lime fields for spring plantings.
- Divide pastures to improve the quality and persistence of pasture plants.
- Locate sources of hybrid bermudagrass sprigs for planting.
- Burn warm-season grass residues in late February.
- Get herbicide sprayers ready to control weeds in dormant bermudagrass fields.